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SUBJECT: THE VITAL LINK - KHOST-GARDEZ ROAD IN AFGHANISTAN
TO BIND PROVINCES AND TRADE ROUTES

Classified By: Acting DCM Alan Yu for reasons 1.4(a), (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The rugged terrain of the Khost-Gardez (K-G) Pass, and its legacy as a mujahedin stronghold along the southeast approach to Kabul, have been challenges to the completion of an efficient and safe road in the area. Complex geography, tribal networks, and insurgent interference have also hindered the extension of governmental authority to the area.

However, a robust counterinsurgency (COIN) focus on the K-G Pass area has for now succeeded in reducing Anti-Afghan Forces (AAF) attacks and creating space for regional development. Progress is being made in paving the route, which is expected to be complete by late 2009. GIROA outreach efforts, including a major shura dedicated to support the K-G road project, could lay the foundations for widespread regional support of the project.

The Importance of the K-G Pass Terrain and Population

¶2. (U) The significance of the K-G Pass is highlighted by three characteristics: geographically, the range rises to 12,700 feet, separating the &Khost basin& from eastern Afghanistan; politically, it is dominated by the Zadran tribal arc; and the K-G Pass lies across the most direct Kabul)Karachi route)- a strategic artery linking the two countries. The GIROA's Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG) identified the road as one of its top two priorities in its proposed highway security strategy. Completion of the road will demonstrate GIROA progress toward reconstruction and improved quality of life, greater economic opportunity and sustainable security throughout the region.

Khost-Paktya Link

¶3. (C) The governors of Khost and Paktya recently reached an important agreement to apportion local-worker hiring, reflecting nearby district population and sub-tribal numbers, for both construction and security of the road. The hiring process is still underway with local sub-contractors, and bears close scrutiny for its potential to upset the delicate tribal dynamics in the region. Prime contractor Louis Berger Group must award at least 25 percent of sub-contracts to Afghan companies. Upwards of 1500 workers will be employed

on the project, of which at least 50 percent must be Afghans (the actual figure is expected to be about 80 percent). Six roadside market centers (three in each province) will encourage local business development and stakeholders.

The Zadran

¶4. (C) The K-G Pass and surrounding &Zadran tribal arc⁸ have long been difficult for outsiders to control. The Zadran arc stretches across the boundaries of three provinces - western Khost, northern Paktika, and southern Paktia - in districts where the Zadran form a majority or sizable minority. The Zadran are a Pashtun tribe, dwelling primarily in Afghanistan, based in villages dotting the small, scattered valleys that crease the K-G massif. The tribe is estimated to number 120,000, with an unknown number who may be long-term refugees in Pakistan. Two notable leaders of the Zadran are Pacha Khan Zadran or &PKZ,⁸ who has reconciled and supports the GIRoA; and Jalaluddin Haqqani, chief of the Pakistan-based Haqqani network Taliban (HQN), a criminal-terrorist syndicate with origins in the anti-Soviet jihad. HQN is one of the main sources of anti-Afghan and Coalition activity, aligning itself with foreign fighters and other militants infiltrating into Afghanistan and operating along its eastern border. Haqqani declared that the new K-G road would never be built.

¶5. (U) The Zadran consist of numerous sub-tribes, and like many tribal groupings in the region, are internally fractious, without consistent alignments, and suspicious of outsiders and formal government at all levels)- significant obstacles to any major endeavor in this region. Securing the loyalty of the Zadran region to the government and

institutions of Afghanistan is thus one of the primary goals behind construction of the 101-kilometer, \$98 million K-G Pass road.

Premier Trade Route

¶6. (U) Successful paving of the K-G Pass route will reduce the Kabul-Karachi driving distance by about 250 miles and provide closer access to railheads in Pakistan. It is also expected to relieve traffic on the current main Kabul-Jalalabad-Khyber Pass-Peshawar route. Though the deeply-rutted and uneven packed-earth road is currently usable by trucks and cars, modern paving and widening will enable a higher volume of vehicles and cargo quicker and safer transit of the pass. Links from the K-G road to secondary lines of communication in the region will better connect volatile tribal districts to market and governance centers, thus promoting their long-term integration and stabilization.

Combined Operations to Extend Afghan Capability and Governance

¶7. (C) The K-G Pass, strategic importance has long been recognized; mujahedin fighters blocked it from 1979 to 1988, until a Soviet-led offensive briefly forced the pass open in November 1988. In 2002-2003, militia loyal to PKZ extorted tolls on the road until PKZ's reconciliation and the removal of &toll checkpoints⁸ in 2004. Most recently, the byway has been a magnet for AAF attacks and banditry) with more than 300 incidents in May 2008, including 169 improvised explosive device (IED)-related - which spurred Combined Task Force (CTF) Currahee to make this area one of its priorities of effort.

¶8. (S) In concert with Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), CTF Currahee conducted Operation Rad-u-Barq (&Thunder and Lightning⁸) V from August 19-30. The operation, a combined series of kinetic and non-kinetic events, aimed at disrupting AAF activities, creating greater security in the K-G Pass area and encouraging local populace support for GIRoA. This operation was built on the foundation of previous Rad-u-Barq campaigns and has sought to shape conditions to allow for a successful voter registration process later in the year. As part of its COIN strategy in

the region, CTF Currahee is also emplacing a number of joint combat outposts in key districts straddling the road to offer greater protection and deny infiltration routes to AAF.

¶9. (S) As K-G road construction progresses, Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) backed by Coalition forces will maintain a security zone around the leading edge of construction work. CTF Currahee elements, as well as DoS and USAID reps, are working closely with road contractor Louis Berger Group to not only ensure that road construction plans are tied into the Task Force,s operations, but also to keep the company abreast of, and provide advice on, local political issues surrounding the project. The Louis Berger Group maintains a security liaison at Currahee,s headquarters to help facilitate these activities.

¶10. (C) The partnership between ANSF) comprising the Afghanistan National Army (ANA), Afghan Border Police (ABP) and Afghan National Police (ANP) - and Coalition Forces remains a cornerstone of the CTF Currahee COIN strategy. Coalition Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) focus on governance and economic capacity building, development and rule of law in conjunction with local leaders. Coalition maneuver units, which also can employ Commander,s Emergency Response Program (CERP) funds, partner and mentor ANSF units, thus improving their capabilities and enhancing Afghan credibility with local communities. Additional coordination and capacity building is achieved by implanting Coalition liaisons, Police Mentoring Team and Embedded Training Teams at all levels of the ANSF. Successive joint U.S.-Afghan operations, dedicated monitoring assets, and population engagements contributed to reducing insurgent activity in the K-G Pass area by 46 percent from May to August 2008, including a one-third decline in IED events.

A Super Shura to Build Support for the Road

¶11. (C) In the latest in a series of public outreach events designed to garner support for the K-G road project, CTF Currahee lent extensive organizational and planning support to an August 28 &super shura.⁸ The event, attended by more than 700 Afghans, brought together the governors from Khost, Logar, Paktika and Paktia provinces, as well as national GIRoA officials, prominent tribal elders, and religious leaders. Shura speakers exhorted participants to bring their communities behind support of the road, for its employment, trade, and national development benefits. Numerous attendees at the shura conveyed to POLADS that they considered the event a great success as it provided for wide-ranging representation and demonstrated linkages between the national government, provincial leaders and local communities. Several key leaders at the shura observed that similar follow-on dialogue (though not necessarily of the same magnitude) would be needed to sustain support for the road and security in the K-G pass area. Future events are already planned.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) After years of false-starts and unfulfilled pledges, it is hard to overestimate the importance of completing and improving this critical line of communication that will not only better connect Afghanistan internally, but will also enhance its linkages to Pakistan and global trade routes. CTF Currahee,s COIN strategy) relying intrinsically on partnership with ANSF, increased Coalition presence in the K-G Pass area, intensive dialogue with governmental, tribal and religious leaders) has produced demonstrable benefits in improved security in the region. Sustaining these accomplishments, however, will require long-term investment in both &hard8 and &soft8 power to prevent AAF from regaining a foothold in this craggy landscape.

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